

The third letter in the book of Revelation is written to the church in Pergamum, which was a very large city further north of Smyrna. And it was once the heart and center of Asia Minor. But it was also a very difficult place to be a Christian, because as Jesus says, Pergamum is Satan's throne. To put it as one author did, they were Christians living in Satan's hometown.

So what did Jesus mean by that? Why did he call Pergamum Satan's throne? A throne in the book of Revelation is always a symbol of power and authority. In Revelation chapter 4, for example, which we'll get to eventually, we will see God's throne in heaven as a sign of his power and authority over all things. So Satan's throne, then, is a symbol of his power, of his influence not only in the city of Pergamum, but also over the whole of Asia Minor. And the reason for this was not just because of the worship of false gods, although that was certainly there too. But rather because it was the center of something that we haven't talked about just yet in our study of the book of Revelation, but something that is important for understanding other parts of the book as well. Pergamum was the center of the worship of the Roman emperor in Asia Minor.

Because the Greeks for a long time had had a habit of treating their leaders as something more than human. They called them things like "lord" or "savior" or "master," and even sometimes they would call them "god." For example, a hymn written in 300 B.C. to a Macedonian king named Demetrius goes like this: "The other gods are far away or do not have ears or do not exist or do not pay any attention at all to us, but you we see present, not of wood or stone, but real." So Demetrius, then, for them was a greater god, because he was close to them. He could take care of them. He could provide for them in a way that they thought that the Greek gods could not. And even after being conquered by the Romans, the Greeks began to treat the Roman emperors in the same way, beginning with Augustus, the first emperor. An inscription from the island of Kos, which is just a little ways south of Ephesus, begins by saying this: "Since Emperor Caesar, son of god, god Sebastos"--Sebastos being the Greek way of saying Augustus--"has by his benefactions to all men outdone even the Olympian gods." So Augustus, then, was not only the son of god, by which they meant Zeus, but he is also greater than the gods because of the gifts that he gave to his people and because of the care that he showed to them. And so in 29 B.C., Pergamum was the first city in Asia Minor to build a temple to Augustus even while he was still alive. Nero, another emperor, would later call himself things like "savior of the world" or "lord of the whole earth." People called on Caesar for help. People gave thanks to Caesar when something went well in their lives. They even used statues of Caesar as a kind of sanctuary, as a way of getting out of trouble. And for a while in Asia Minor, the new year even began on Augustus' birthday. So in every possible way, then, the Roman emperor was not only treated as a god, he was worshiped as one as well.

And it's important to remember, as I've said before, Christians, that religion and politics in the Roman Empire were one and the same thing. They were not separate the way that we separate them. Worshiping the emperor like this was not something that a few weirdos were doing in the city. No, it was the very heart of the city. People showed their loyalty to the emperor in this way. They thought it was important in holding the city together, in promoting law and order. And to not worship the emperor was considered disloyal. It was considered destructive and subversive, like you were trying to tear the fabric of society apart. You can only imagine the kinds of questions, then, that they would've asked the Christians. "Why won't you worship the emperor? Are you trying to cause trouble? Do you want the city to fall apart? Why do you keep refusing? Why are you being so stubborn? If you keep it up, it's not going to go well for you."

Now, I know, Christians, this all sounds pretty strange to us, maybe even sounds a little bit silly. Because our leaders, after all, don't demand that we call them a god. But even if that has changed, we still face a similar kind of pressure in our day, a political or a social pressure to go along for what they consider to be the good of society. And this pressure often wants to take the place of God, to say things that really only belong to God. So, for example, it tries to say that marriage is only what you want it to be, that we can just change it to fit our pleasures. Or it says that being male and female is just a matter of preference, that we can identify with whatever it is we consider ourselves to be, regardless of who we are physically. In fact, the whole of next month is about to be dedicated to the glorification of sin. You can't get away from it even in the media. It's everywhere, this pressure to conform. And to speak out against such things is increasingly being labeled as a hate crime. There have been Christians who have been arrested simply for handing out Bibles at a parade or for speaking out in public against these things. It's a threat to our democracy! we are told. This is extremist behavior! This is going to tear everything apart. Are you trying to cause trouble? Do you want it to fall apart? Why do you keep refusing? Why are you being so stubborn? It's not going to go well for you if you keep it up. Caesar may not be a god anymore, but he's still up to his old tricks.

So how do you respond, Christians? What do you do with this kind of pressure? There's really only two ways that we can respond. One way is to stand firm, to push back against these things, to hold onto the truth no matter what the cost may be. And that was something that the church in Pergamum had done very well. Jesus says in verse 13: "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells." So the church in Pergamum, then, had held fast to Jesus. They had not let go, even at great cost. Antipas was killed because of it. Because Jesus is Lord and not Caesar. And it's important to be faithful to the truth, no matter what.

But the other way that we might respond to this, Christians, is to compromise, to give in to go along. And some in Pergamum had gone that way, especially when the pressure became too great. Jesus again says verses 14 and 15: "But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans." Balaam, of course, is the prophet in the Old Testament who had the talking donkey. But after that incident, Balaam led Israel astray by convincing Moab to seduce them into error. Israel had worshiped the Moabite gods at Peor, falling into idolatry and compromise. In fact, in Numbers chapter 31 we are told that "Behold, these,"--meaning the Moabites--"on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord."

And some of the people in Pergamum had done the same thing. They had given in and compromised and went along with this false worship. And I'm sure that they were convinced it was the right thing to do. I'm sure they thought that it was perfectly fine for them to do this. Because it's good to be nice, right? It's good to be friendly. It's good to be positive. It's good not to be a stick in the mud. We can show others that we're not strange. We're not standoffish. We're just like them. Maybe we would even be a witness to Jesus by doing these things! But it was wrong, Christians. It was wrong for them to compromise. Because the teaching of Balaam leads

to death. There can be no compromise between Satan and Christ. There can be no limping between two opinions. As Jesus says in Luke chapter 4, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."

But the most serious problem in Pergamum was not the compromisers, as big of a problem as that was. The worst problem in Pergamum was the others who did not warn those who compromised against what they were doing. They were firm against the world. They stood firm and proclaimed the truth to a world which tried to get them to give in. They were good at that. Jesus praised them for that. But they were soft when it came to speaking the truth to those within the Church. Instead of saying that something was wrong, they simply tolerated it. And no doubt they did it in the name of love. Because it's always easier to speak out against something out there, to speak against those who are where Satan's throne is. But it's so much more difficult to confront error within the Church, to speak the truth to those who have given in. And faced with this problem, we are tragically tempted to compromise in the same way. To say that it's not so bad. Because it's good to be nice, right? It's good to be friendly. It's good to be positive. It's good not to be a stick in the mud. We can show them the Gospel by not saying anything at all. And it's better to have them on our side, after all. That's what we want. We are all in this together. But this is also wrong. Because just as the letter to Ephesus showed us that truth without love is not good, so also we have to see that love without truth is just as bad. Because sometimes love means you have to just say it like it is, even if it hurts to do so. We have to say these things to lead others away from their error, so that they would repent and live. And so that sword that we see coming out of Jesus's mouth is not pointed at the city. But that sword, that symbol of judgment, is pointed against the Church. Jesus says in verse 16: "Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth." They must repent and speak the truth also to those within the Church, or Christ would come and do it himself. And that would be a far more severe judgment to endure. Because just as we must not compromise with the world, Christians, so we also must not compromise with the truth.

But Jesus promises great blessings to those who do not compromise, to those who hold fast to the truth. Jesus says in verse 17: "To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it." And to understand what this means for us, we have to understand why people are tempted to compromise in the first place. Compromise is a lot like idolatry. People do it because they want to get something. They think that it's going to help them in some way. Giving in will lead others to accept me. Giving in means I can find community. I can be a part of the community. Giving in means that I will be happy, and so forth. We always hope to get something by giving in in this way. To put it a little bit differently, compromising means looking for short-term rewards. To say that I can have these things now. I can be accepted now. I don't have to fight now. I can have all of this right now, and I don't have to wait. But by doing so, we give up on what truly matters in the long-term: truth with God and life with him forever.

So Jesus promises us here something far greater in the long-term, something far better than compromising can ever give to us. The first thing is Jesus promises us the hidden manna. The manna, of course, being the bread given to Israel in the wilderness. But it is also a picture of the true spiritual food which comes to us from Jesus. Jesus himself says, John chapter 6: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never

thirst." Jesus is better than any pagan feast. Jesus is better than any short-term reward, because the manna which we get in him is a feast which will never come to an end.

The same is true of that white stone. White stones were used for a lot of different things in those days, but the one that I think is the most important is that it was used as a ticket for a feast. If you had a white stone with you, you would be let in to the feast. If you didn't have one, you'd be turned away at the door. So Jesus, then, is giving us an invitation to the true heavenly feast, something far better than anything on earth.

And on that invitation has been written a new name, a name given to us by God. As Isaiah 62 says: "The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give." This new name means that we are no longer despised and rejected. We are no longer turned away from by the world, but rather glorified by the Lord who has given us something far better than this world can ever give. And so Jesus gives us all of these things--the manna, the stone, the new name--as a way of showing us that what waits for us is far greater. It might seem tempting to compromise in the short-term, but the reward that waits is better by far.

So Christians, don't give in to compromise. It simply isn't worth it. Whatever we hope to gain right now is nothing compared to what will be ours in Jesus Christ. So speak the truth to the world, and speak the truth also to those who have given in in the Church, so that they may turn from their error and live. Because this is what it means to truly walk in love. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches!

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, true bread of heaven, strengthen us so that we do not compromise with the world, but may always turn toward you in every trouble; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.